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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1158
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6396
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 008477

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CO

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH BEGINS EFFORT TO CONTACT FARC ON
"ENCOUNTER ZONE" PROPOSAL

REF: BOGOTA 8405

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Catholic priest Dario Echeverri told us the Church will reach out to the FARC to explain its proposal to create an "encounter zone" for GOC talks with the FARC on a humanitarian exchange. He said President Uribe had asked the Church to make the proposal to deflect international pressure over the issue in Buenos Aires, but added that Uribe had told Monsignor Castro he was prepared to take risks to achieve an exchange. Echeverri acknowledged that the Church's initiative faces many challenges including internal FARC divisions, Venezuelan President Chavez's likely opposition, and the actions of other intermediaries. Meanwhile, Colombian media coverage of Argentine President Cristina Kirchner's inauguration focused on regional support for a possible GOC humanitarian exchange with the FARC, as well as Chavez' bitter criticism of Uribe. END SUMMARY.

CHURCH BEGINS WORK TOWARDS EXCHANGE

12. (C) Father Dario Echeverri told us December 10 that the Church initiative to create an "encounter zone," announced by President Uribe on December 7 (reftel), was orchestrated by presidential advisor Jose Obdulio Gaviria. In a November 30 meeting at the Casa de Narino, Gaviria, Juan Mayr, Echeverri and others discussed possible ways forward after the collapse of the Chavez/Cordoba facilitation effort. Echeverri suggested that Uribe return to the encounter zone proposal (zona de encuentro) made by the Europeans in December 2005. Gaviria later discussed the idea with Uribe, who accepted it. The GOC then asked the Church to publicly make the proposal its own, arguing that the FARC would reject anything proposed by the GOC. Bishops' Conference President Monsignor Augusto Castro agreed to do so.

¶3. (C) Echeverri said Uribe accepted the Church's proposal because he realized he could not go to Buenos Aires for Cristina Kirchner's presidential inauguration "empty handed."

The French were reaching out to Latin American and European leaders, Chavez and Cordoba continued to talk with the hostages' family members, and domestic pressure to achieve a humanitarian accord was building. The encounter zone initiative helped Uribe neutralize international pressure, reestablish GOC control over the process, and put the ball in the FARC's court.

¶4. (C) Echeverri commented that in a December 9 meeting in Tunja with Castro, Uribe had emphasized his humanitarian motives in urging the Church to accept this role. The President noted he had made a calculation of the potential political costs before accepting Chavez' help in facilitating an exchange, but had decided in the end that the humanitarian concerns outweighed the political risks. Uribe said he was prepared to take risks to obtain the hostages' freedom. He could be flexible on the size of a zone and would consider waiving the prohibition on FARC weapons if circumstances justified it. Echeverri said Uribe cautioned, however, that the Church should take a low-profile approach and not seek to involve multiple Colombian and international actors.

PROPOSAL FACES CHALLENGES

¶5. (C) Echeverri said the Church proposal faces numerous obstacles including: 1) internal divisions within the FARC between more "political" actors like Alfonso Cano who

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recognize that FARC kidnappings damaged its public image, hard-liners like Mono Jojoy who favor a military approach, and pro-Chavistas such as Ivan Marquez; 2) the likely adverse reactions of Chavez and Senator Cordoba; and 3) the opposition of longtime political operator Alvaro Leyva. Echeverri said he would reach out to Cordoba--even though the GOC would not like it--to see if she would help the Church's effort. He would also reach out to the Vatican affiliated San Egidio movement in Rome to see if he could involve/control Leyva through them. Leyva has good contacts with San Egidio.

¶6. (C) Echeverri outlined the Church's next steps. The 14 member Bishop's Peace Commission will meet December 13 to discuss the initiative, and Castro will use some Commission members to reach out to contacts within the FARC to explain the proposal and the Church's role. Castro had requested a meeting with Alfonso Cano three months ago, but has not received a response. Echeverri noted that in recent years, the Church's efforts to meet with senior FARC leaders have been unsuccessful. He said he would also travel to Venezuela to meet with FARC "Foreign Minister" Rodrigo Granda, and would appeal for French and Swiss support. He had spoken with the French Ambassador and Swiss Charge on December 9 about the Church's initiative.

HOSTAGES A CAUSE CELEBRE IN ARGENTINA

¶7. (C) President Uribe's efforts on a possible humanitarian exchange dominated Colombian media coverage of the December 9 inauguration of Argentine President Cristina Kirchner. In her inaugural address, Kirchner asked that god "enlighten" Uribe to find a solution to the hostage situation. Chilean President Michele, Brazilian President Lula da Silva and other Presidents offered their support for GOC efforts to achieve an accord. In contrast, President Chavez bitterly attacked Uribe for suspending his facilitation role, claiming "Uribe stabbed me in the back." He said he had lost confidence in Uribe, and warned that Venezuela's trade relations with Colombia would suffer. Echeverri noted that

Uribe told him on December 9 that Chavez had sent a message to Uribe two days before asking to be allowed to resume his facilitation efforts and promising to drop his threats to harm bilateral ties. Uribe told Echeverri and Castron that he would not respond to Chavez' message, and reiterated that he would not allow Chavez back into the process.

Brownfield